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DIMINISHING RETURNS IN REDUCING NON-PROMOTION

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One school of educational philosophers complains bitterly about the lock-step in our graded school system; another bewails the large number of pupils who fail to pass their grades from term to term. The step is not securely enough locked to satisfy this latter group.

The schools are severely criticized from both angles and very properly so. But here one must distinguish clearly between the schools and their administrators and teachers. The writers for popular magazines and platform reformers shout their complaints at the teaching profession, assuming that teachers are either too stupid to understand the true conditions or too obstinate to correct imperfections. Yet the entire teaching body of our public-school system understands clearly this weakness in regard to the progress of children through the grades and finds it hard to understand why the public is unwilling to furnish means for the correction of the evil. Reformers may well turn part of their attention to the public which can and will have as good schools as it is willing to support. Never can it have any better.

The matter of promotion and non-promotion in school is one of the greatest causes of complaint against the public schools. The chief complaint of the majority of parents is that their children are not promoted. Matters of instruction and acquisition of knowledge are generally taken for granted or are not considered. The apparent aim of some school administrators is to be able to report a small percentage of failures. The general assumption is that the school has the matter completely within its control, and so it has. The further assumption is that non-promotion is a great evil, and so it is. But the real question of importance is whether a

high non-promotion percentage is as great a misfortune to a significantly large group of pupils as is universal or so-called perfect promotion.

A so-called "fine promotion average" is the easiest achievement of a public school. The administration needs merely to say, "Let there be promotion," and promotion is. And so it is that promotion facts often have little significance for judging the excellence of schools, the weight of much impassioned logic and argument notwithstanding. The question of real importance is one of group and individual progress, not in school grades but in school endeavor. Retardation is the real evil. Retardation is not synonymous with non-promotion. Acceleration is not synonymous with double or rapid promotion. Retardation is not the especial characteristic of the slow or dull pupil but most generally is the misfortune of the bright student. These are things that teachers know; moreover, most teachers know their remedies and would be delighted to apply them if it were possible.

What percentage of promotion should be expected in the traditional grade-organization schools where special slow classes and special accelerated classes are rare and in which the rule of organization is of the unselected type? The average school teacher and school principal get the impression that some administrators and some reformers expect the teacher, by exceptional teaching and by the exercise of good judgment and sympathy, almost completely to eliminate non-promotion. No one has attempted to state what is a reasonable expectation in this matter, and perhaps no one cares to risk a statement. We must be contented with the statement that the largest possible number of pupils should progress with their grades.

This investigation of non-promotion included a study of the permanent record cards of 797 pupils above the first grade in one school. The pupils were all in the school when the study was made so that their teachers could be interviewed concerning them and their deliberate judgment secured whenever questions arose. The particular school is a typical elementary school in a large city, its only unique feature perhaps being that it tends to draw its children from a high social class.

To determine the extent to which non-promotion can be reduced in a typical city school, a careful study was made of the causes of non-promotion and the possibilities of reducing it. From a long list of causes of non-promotion issued by the school administration and used by the teachers in reporting the causes of failure a few typical ones were selected and two added—the course of study as a cause of non-promotion and the teacher's judgment. The other causes were transfer, pupils entering from other school systems, absence, and the unequal development of the pupils. The last named is substituted for causes variously listed among the physical and mental causes of non-promotion. The several conditioning factors will be presented separately.

NON-PROMOTION AND TRANSFERS FROM OTHER SCHOOLS WITHIN THE SYSTEM

School principals in large school systems have come to understand that their schools as a part of a system are strengthened or weakened by the other schools of the city. It is well recognized that every strong school, as well as every strong teacher, adds to the strength of every other school and teacher. It then becomes the desire of every school worker, even from a selfish standpoint, to contribute every item of strength that it is possible to contribute.

Good repute and the confidence of the public are among the greatest assets a school or a school system can have. Anything that increases the confidence of patrons in any school in the system is then a direct asset to every school in the system. One of the ways in which this confidence can be gained is for every school and teacher to give full recognition and credit to the work done by every other school and teacher. In the matter of the treatment of transferred pupils we have one opportunity to give this credit. Just as it is absolutely necessary for each teacher in an individual school to strengthen the confidence of the patrons in her fellow-teachers by accepting their work in the same spirit in which she hopes her work will be approved, so it is desirable for each school to accept the work of the other schools in a manner that will extend the confidence of all concerned. Some teachers find it hard to agree that the pupils sent them by their colleagues are adequately prepared

for their work; there is even more danger of failing to regard the work of the other schools as adequate.

A study of the permanent record cards of 797 pupils above Grade IB shows the facts presented in Table I with regard to transferred pupils.

TABLE I
RECORD OF REPEATERS AMONG TRANSFERRED PUPILS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Total number of pupils transferred..... | 158 |
| Number repeating the first term after transfer..... | 30 |
| Number repeating the second term after transfer..... | 5 |
| Number repeating the third term after transfer..... | 4 |
| Number repeating later than the third term after transfer.. | 9 |

Assuming that transfer should not be held to be the cause of failure after the third term of the new school, we have thirty-nine cases of failure which might be due to a change of schools. Table II shows the facts concerning these thirty-nine pupils.

TABLE II
FACTS CONCERNING THIRTY-NINE FAILURES POSSIBLY DUE TO TRANSFER

| | |
|---|----|
| Number who had repeated grades in former schools..... | 18 |
| Number who had poor records in former schools (including the eighteen who had failed)..... | 24 |
| Number who had good records of achievement..... | 14 |
| Number who had no record..... | 1 |

In general, pupils in regular attendance who have to repeat grades have some weakness that is hard to overcome; the records of the eighteen pupils who had repeated grades in former schools show that every one of them had trouble that might have caused them to fail had they remained in their former schools. It is possible that they would have worked out of their difficulties, but it seems hardly fair to charge these failures to transfer. The other six pupils with poor records of achievement in their former schools might have failed in these schools, and it is fair to charge their failures, like the other eighteen, to the conditions which produced the poor records rather than to the fact of transfer. This leaves fifteen pupils who had good records in their former schools (adding the one with no record to the fourteen) to be

accounted for. One of these pupils came to the city from Holland and, entering Grade IB, skipped Grades IA, IIB, IIA, IVB, and VA, and is now obliged to repeat Grade VIA, having gone too rapidly to be thorough in some essential details. Another of these pupils was ill and able to attend but forty-four days of the term; another attended seventy-five days in an irregular manner. The causes assigned for the other twelve failures are: lack of concentration, 2; confusion, 1; carelessness, 1; slowness, 4; indifference, 1; dreaming, 1; lack of application, 1; change of schools, 1.

If the foregoing explanation of the permanent record cards of the pupils concerned is correct, then merely 7.6 per cent of the pupils transferred to this school from other city schools failed because of the transfer.

We conclude that the treatment of transferred pupils has been so considerate and satisfactory that there is little hope of reducing non-promotion through more special effort with them.

NON-PROMOTION AND TRANSFERS FROM OTHER SCHOOL SYSTEMS

In dealing adequately with children entering a school from without the city, the principal finds one of his difficult problems. Parents of such children seem always to have entire confidence in the ability of the pupils and in the excellence of the schools from which they come. It is often believed that the pupil should skip a grade because a former teacher has given assurance that this is a reasonable expectation. Sometimes the previous experience of the pupil in being put back in other schools makes the parents feel that demotion will be repeated regardless of ability. Most of these pupils have no fair records of their work in their former schools, and the principal has difficulty in finding out what they have done. Thus, a lack of proper confidence seems to characterize the attitude of both parent and principal. The parent is apt to feel that, if the pupil is not placed in the grade from which he comes, the principal is beginning unjustly with the pupil; the principal knows that he is in danger of placing the pupil in a too advanced grade and that he may have to demote him, with considerable loss, after the teacher has spent a month, perhaps, in locating the pupil's abilities.

It has been the policy in School No. 23 in Rochester, in the absence of sufficient help to make adequate educational and psychological diagnoses, to examine the record of the child, if that is obtainable, or to question the pupil if no record is to be had, and to compare the age of the entering pupil with the average age of the pupils in his prospective grade. If the age closely corresponds and if the record is good, the pupil is placed in the grade from which he comes; otherwise he is placed in a lower grade. In either case, it is stipulated that the pupil may be reassigned as soon as his proper position in the school is ascertained. In general, there is a considerable amount of trouble in fitting these "out-of-the-system" pupils into the grades. An attempt is made to save the new pupil from retardation because of his change of schools. The facts concerning these pupils are shown in Table III compiled from a study of the permanent record cards of all pupils transferred from without the Rochester system.

TABLE III

FACTS CONCERNING "OUT-OF-THE-SYSTEM" TRANSFERS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Number of pupils transferred from other school systems... | 142 |
| Number who have not repeated grades in School No. 23... | 104 |
| Number repeating first term after entering..... | 19 |
| Number repeating second term after entering..... | 9 |
| Number repeating the third term after entering..... | 2 |
| Number repeating later than the third term..... | 8 |

If it is agreed that those pupils repeating later than the third term after entrance should not be said to fail because of transfer, there are thirty pupils whose failures might be due to transfer. The causes assigned for these failures are included in Table IV.

TABLE IV

REASONS ASSIGNED FOR FAILURES AMONG THIRTY PUPILS TRANSFERRED FROM OTHER SYSTEMS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Slow, backward, poor mentality..... | 16 |
| Ill..... | 1 |
| Late entrance..... | 3 |
| Carelessness, indifference..... | 3 |
| Change of schools..... | 6 |
| Poor in arithmetic..... | 1 |

The failure of the one who was ill should not be charged to wrong classification. There are then twenty-nine pupils who failed because of wrong classification. This means that 20.4 per cent of the pupils from without the city schools fail soon after entering. In studying these cards with the teachers, it was found that sixteen of these pupils are at the present time in difficulties for which there is apparently no relief, for they seem very backward.

We conclude, then, that still more care is necessary in placing new pupils if non-promotion is to be reduced in so far as "out-of-the-system" pupils are concerned.

ABSENCE AS A CAUSE OF NON-PROMOTION

School No. 23 is troubled with a type of absence not quite usual. Truancy is almost unknown; attendance officers are seldom called on for assistance; the school depends upon the efforts of its teachers and the interest of its patrons to keep the attendance good. Nevertheless, there are many absences. A large number of pupils leave for summer homes before school is out in the spring and return late in the fall. A report, well founded or not, that some childhood disease is in a grade never fails to cause absence. We therefore thought, before making this study, that absence caused much retardation. It was found that there have been 373 terms' work repeated by all the pupils now in the school. Absence is assigned as the cause of failure in 86 cases. A careful examination of the failure cards clearly shows, however, that "slow" would have been as appropriate a cause as absence in 28 cases. Thus 56 terms' work was repeated because of absence. This is 15 per cent of the whole number of failures. This seems a small percentage when the causes of absence of young children are so numerous. It leads us to believe that, unless a child is absent a long time or has been weak in his work before the absence, he is not apt to fail as a result of the absence. This observation is supported by the fact that in the records of 193 seventh- and eighth-grade pupils now graduated 96 terms were counted in which pupils had attended 70 or less days without failing to pass at the end of the term.

We conclude that, while absence is a cause of a considerable number of non-promotions in our school, we shall probably not be

able to reduce failure from this cause very much, since these failures are due to long absences, these in turn being caused by conditions beyond control.

THE COURSE OF STUDY AS A CAUSE OF NON-PROMOTION

Observation had led us to think of the fifth and seventh grades as being the most difficult, so we undertook to determine the facts in so far as our school is concerned. The examination of the permanent records of the 797 pupils in the grades showed that 247, or 31 per cent, of our pupils have repeated grades somewhere during their school histories. In addition, there were 104 pupils who entered the school from without the city and for whom no data before transferring could be secured. Some of these latter must have repeated grades.

TABLE V
PERCENTAGE OF FAILURES IN GRADES IB TO VIIIA*

| Grade | Number of Pupils | Number of Repetitions | Percentage of Pupils Failing |
|------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| IB..... | 471 | 38 | 8.0 |
| IA..... | 463 | 22 | 4.7 |
| IIB..... | 451 | 19 | 4.2 |
| IIA..... | 445 | 17 | 3.8 |
| IIIB..... | 409 | 21 | 5.1 |
| IIIA..... | 383 | 21 | 5.4 |
| IVB..... | 348 | 23 | 6.6 |
| IVA..... | 335 | 18 | 5.3 |
| VB..... | 308 | 41 | 13.3 |
| VA..... | 291 | 28 | 9.6 |
| VIB..... | 243 | 27 | 11.1 |
| VIA..... | 209 | 17 | 8.1 |
| VIIB..... | 180 | 34 | 18.8 |
| VIIA..... | 146 | 37 | 25.5 |
| VIIIB..... | 96 | 16 | 16.6 |
| VIIIA..... | 57 | 4 | 7.0 |

*While 229 pupils repeated grades, there were 383 repetitions because some repeated more than once. Eighteen pupils known to have repeated in other schools were not counted in this study.

After Grade IB has been passed, there is apparently no considerable difference in the difficulty of the grades until Grade VB is reached. The percentage of repetitions in this grade is more than twice as high as that of any primary grade except Grade IB. The percentage of failures in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades is very large. The percentage of failures in the grammar grades is three

times as high as in the primary grades. The percentage of repetitions in the first eight sections as a group is 5.4; in the upper eight, it is 13.3. In all cases except one the B sections show more failures than the A sections. This is surprising, as many times teachers have stated their willingness to promote children to the A sections because they teach that grade and hope to be able to bring the pupils up to standard, although they do not feel like promoting children of doubtful ability to a new teacher.

It is apparent that some decided factor is operating to make the upper grades of this school far more difficult than the lower, a situation quite different from the city tendency.

A number of reasons for this will suggest themselves; we feel that the condition cannot be explained in terms of teaching ability or in terms of varying standards on the part of the teachers in the grades affected. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that high-school records show that we are not holding our pupils to too high a standard of achievement in the upper grades, while all of the educational measurements applied to the lower grades seem to show that they are well taught.

Either the course of study or our interpretation of it seems to be responsible for this condition. In the first four grades instruction is largely in abstract and memory facts. Even in the case of reading, due to an overemphasis on the mechanical and formal side, this has become true. When Grade VB is reached, there is an entirely different plan of work. The concrete problems in arithmetic, the comprehension of the entirely new idea of the difficult fractions, and the application of the reading to the work in geography are all novel and hard. They all involve the reasoning powers as opposed to memory. In this grade the differences in the pupils' powers become more apparent, and the poorer ones find themselves in trouble. In Grade VIIB the new type of work in history, the complexity of the percentage problem, the new work in technical grammar, together with the necessity for more independent study, may perhaps operate so to pile up difficulties of former grades as to cause failure.

If it were not for the facts of the city records of promotion, we would declare with confidence that the course of study is of unequal

difficulty, and that this is causing many failures. Theoretically, our upper-grade teaching may be poor; practically, we know it is not. Perhaps our pupils are coming to the more difficult grades too young as compared with other schools. This seems hardly plausible, for there is little difference between the ages of our graduates and those of other schools.

We conclude that we need to make a careful study of the cause of the apparent unequal difficulty of the fifth and seventh grades where so much non-promotion is localized.

UNEQUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AS A CAUSE OF NON-PROMOTION AND RETARDATION

A study of the 391 repetitions of grades by our pupils shows that absence caused 56 of them; transfer, 44; and some mental trouble, such as lack of concentration, backwardness, slowness, lack of reasoning power, inability to do the work, mental confusion, immaturity, 253; all other causes, 38. Thus, 64.7 per cent of the failures in the school are, in the opinion of the teachers, caused by the unequal development of the pupils. This is a condition which is impossible for teachers to control. The laws of mental and physical growth cannot be undone. Poor teaching cannot be blamed too much in this matter, for the teaching is a constant factor. Hereditary differences appear in spite of all efforts to ignore or equate them.

The individual differences of children of the same age and the same grades are well shown by the Otis tests given to Grades VIIB and VIIIA in June, 1919. These differences are real and show variations in ability to do the things required by these tests. In Grade VIIB the 52 scores ranged from 66 to 176; the median was 114.5, and the standard deviation 24.4. In Grade VIIIA the test was shortened from ten to eight parts and the highest score was 128, and the lowest 63. The median was 94 and the standard deviation 14.9. The variability in the two grades is thus seen to be about the same and very great.

The same condition of wide variation is shown by every standard test given these groups. For instance, in the Gray reading tests the comprehension scores of the VIIA pupils ranged from 0 to 55, and about the same variation is shown by all other grades tested.

Our experiences with mental, educational, and physical measurements completely support the findings of Crampton, Terman, and Haggerty, *et al.*, and show that the elementary-school population, especially in the early adolescent years, is distinctly atypical. Since the average age of pupils entering the Rochester high schools is approximately fourteen and one-half years, it will be seen that the elementary schools have variation problems similar to the high schools in the physical and mental development of adolescence.

It seems clear, then, that the major cause of non-promotion and of much of our retardation is involved in the fundamental nature of child development, and that the needs of this development must be satisfied as nearly as possible for each individual pupil if we wish him to progress at his normal rate. It also appears that, with all the known variation in individual abilities, a promotion of 90 per cent of all the pupils in the city, especially in the upper grades, may well be nearer a crime than a credit to us.

Non-promotion and retardation are not synonymous, and it is retardation and not non-promotion that should give us the greatest concern. A non-promoted pupil need not be retarded, and a promoted pupil who is not fairly well prepared for the work of his new grade is apt to be retarded by the promotion. In general, non-promotion merely means that the pupil must repeat his grade, while retardation means that the pupil is too old for his grade. The truly retarded pupil, however, is the one who does not progress at the full rate warranted by his mental and physical development. With this meaning attached to retardation, it is plain that it may be more general among the "bright" than among the "slow." If this interpretation is accepted, the backward pupil whose needs have been fairly met need not be considered retarded.

Our survey of the present standings of the 229 pupils who have repeated grades in the school shows that 119 of them are now on a par with their companions; 60 are still poor with a prospect of becoming average; 50 are regarded by the teachers as being so seriously backward that they cannot improve to average, if kept in grades with average pupils, no matter how much they may repeat. It is this last group that causes our greatest difficulty. We seem unable materially to help them, and they in turn are a

serious drawback to their companions. Practically all of them are in the upper grades. We feel that these facts indicate that, while neither repeating nor skipping meets the needs of either group, it is safer, until better grouping is possible, to have more cases of repetition of a grade and to meet more fully the needs of the brighter pupils than to have fewer such cases on the assumption that we thereby meet the needs of the slower pupils. The needs of the slower pupils can be met, in a measure, by repetition, while the retardation of the bright cannot be remedied.

TEACHERS' JUDGMENTS AND NON-PROMOTION

Do teachers tend to err in promoting or non-promoting children? Occasionally, perhaps; generally, no. Our experience is that, when teachers do err, they do so more often on the side of leniency. Most teachers will agree that each term they tend to promote pupils who are hardly prepared for the next grade. On the other hand, we have known but one case of unwise non-promotion in five years. It does not appear that we can reduce our non-promotion percentage by improving the teacher's judgment in regard to promotion determinates.

Recently all our VIIB pupils were given the Otis tests and the results correlated with a roughly estimated average of student marks given by six departmental teachers during two terms. The result was positive, high, and significant (.574). Only six cases lie far from the line of perfect correlation, three cases showing relatively better grades than the intelligence scores would have suggested and three poorer. In practically no case was a pupil in danger of being failed until being theoretically called to the attention of his teacher because of his high intelligence score. Generally speaking, the intelligence score threw light upon the proposed trial promotion and merely added indorsement in cases of full promotion or non-promotion. We realize that the teachers' marks are significantly influenced by the results of standardized educational tests which are given frequently. These help to refine the marks and lead us to conclude that, on the whole, our teachers mark well and promote, trial promote, and fail students fairly accurately and that better teacher-judgment for the reduction of non-promotion is not likely to be secured.

SUMMARY

We have seen that we cannot expect materially to reduce non-promotion by handling in better fashion such causes as transfer within the system, absence, and teachers' judgment; we can perhaps make some slight reduction by better classifying "out-of-the-system" transfers and by marked alteration of the course of study for certain grades; the overwhelmingly large cause of non-promotion is the unequal development of children, and this condition does not become automatically dissipated by such correctives as better teaching, more definite promotion standards, short terms and more frequent promotions, increasing the number of trial promotions and permitting the receiving teacher to decide the promotion, the Batavia system, early dismissal of the bright pupils, individualizing instruction, motivating instruction, the project method, teaching to study, supervising study, etc.

Non-promotion, like the poor, we shall always have with us, primarily because boys and girls differ. With more and more attention to the matters of transfer, absence, teachers' judgments, improvement of the course of study, etc., some improvement in non-promotion will result; but the limit will soon be approached and slight improvement come to reward great effort. Radical improvement can come only by so organizing the machinery of the school that each pupil can progress at the rate suited to him. This in turn involves an enormous expenditure of funds for special classes for the subnormals and supernormals, junior high schools, more and quite specialized teachers, etc. With the subnormals automatically eliminated from the grade by being sent to special classes, with junior high schools and other multiple organization types guiding pupils into the field where they should work, non-promotion percentages will decrease. Until the social mind is willing to finance its schools so as to pay for the reduction of non-promotion, the schools as now organized will be rewarded with increases in pupil-promotion at an arithmetic rate where effort and zeal are applied in geometric proportion. Radical reduction in non-promotion cannot honestly be secured without radical reorganization.